

Mining shows support of regulating mercury

By JOHN SENTS - Staff Writer – Elko Daily Free Press

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The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection's workshop on a proposed mercury emissions control program drew about 30 to Great Basin College. ELKO - Representatives from the mining industry were largely supportive of a proposed mercury reductions regulatory program presented by the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection at a workshop at Great Basin College on Monday, while critics of the program from the environmental community remain critical.

About 30 visitors, mainly from the mining industry, came to GBC to hear about the proposed Nevada Mercury Air Emissions Control Program, which would be the first in the country to regulate mercury emissions from precious metal mining, said Greg Remer, permitting supervisor in air quality for the NDEP.

"We (Nevada) have probably the largest mining activity in the country," Remer said. "Both the mining industry and the state feel it is necessary to control the mercury coming from those mining properties."

The NDEP previously presented its emissions plan on Dec. 15 at a workshop in Carson City. The Elko workshop was originally scheduled for Dec. 13, but was rescheduled because flights were canceled that day at Reno/Tahoe International Airport due to heavy fog.

Teresa Conner, manager of environmental resources for Queenstake Resources USA, Inc., said she attended the NDEP's workshop in Carson City last week and wanted to attend the Elko workshop as well. She said Queenstake already has emissions controls, but the proposed regulatory program would upgrade their system.

"Queenstake feels it is a good program and a strong program," Conner said. "We feel the new regulatory program will provide some more consistency across the metal mining operations in the state."

Mary B. Korpi, director of external relations for Newmont Mining Corp.'s North American operations, said she attended the meeting to learn more detail about the proposed regulations. She said Newmont staff from three operating sites also attended to learn more about the program.

"We are fully in support of the work that the NDEP has done with these regulations," Korpi said. "We will be involved in the implementation at our various operations."

Others at the meeting expressed concerns that the emissions control program does not study the impacts of mercury on the environment or do sampling in areas around Nevada mines.

"Has NDEP done studies in this area?" asked Julie Fishel of the Western Shoshone Defense Project. "I don't see any mention of it, and it concerns me."

Remer said the purpose of the mercury emissions control program is better enforceability of mercury emissions.

"The impacts to the environment are an ongoing investigation," Remer said. "We don't know where to put the resources yet. All that is still being developed. This is the next step in an ongoing process."

Some in the environmental community say the program doesn't go far enough to control mercury emissions.

"It is for appeasement, for people to feel better, that they are going to start permitting the mines," said Julie Wedge, executive director of Great Basin Mine Watch. "But it is not an effective permitting process. We want to see meaningful change in the process. Right now, there isn't meaningful change in the process."

The proposed regulatory program would follow a voluntary mercury reduction program established in 2001 between the NDEP and the four largest gold producers in the state: Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc., Newmont Mining Corp., Placer Dome Inc. and Queenstake Resources Ltd.

The voluntary program was established after the NDEP found that five mining properties operated by these companies accounted for more than 90 percent of mercury emissions in the state. The Voluntary Mercury Reduction Program established in 2001 helped drop emissions at those five properties by 82 percent. According to the EPA, mercury emissions from the five operations dropped from 21,098 pounds in 2001 to 3,755 pounds in 2004.

The state of Nevada's proposed emissions control program differs from the voluntary program currently in place. The regulatory program requires enhanced monitoring, testing, record keeping and reporting; expanded coverage to all precious metal mining operations; a requirement for improved and additional controls; and unit level applicability rather than by facility.

The unit level applicability means that mines will be required to show that individual thermal treatment units in a mining facility meet acceptable mercury standards. If the units do not meet emissions standards, mines will not receive their emissions permits.

The NDEP believes that the new regulatory program will build on progress from the voluntary program.

Assemblyman John Carpenter, R-Elko, expressed concerns at the meeting that the regulatory program would create more paperwork than results.

"I'm for reducing emissions, but I don't know if this program will do it or not," Carpenter said. "I'm wondering whether we are entering into another situation where we are asking them to put more paperwork in."

Remer said the regulatory plan will allow the NDEP to enforce mercury emission control, which isn't possible with the voluntary plan.

"It became clear that the (voluntary) program was not enforceable," Remer said. "There was some concern whether the numbers generated were real numbers."

Mercury can be absorbed by living tissue and affect the central nervous system.

The State Environmental Commission will hold a hearing in late January or early February to consider approving the Nevada Mercury Air Emissions Control Program.

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